

‘With nothing but the clothes on their backs’ Laotian refugee family sponsored in 1980 by Pilgrim Church visits Duxbury again

By Mary McKenzie
Clipper Reporter



Pang Yen and Lao Herr, a Laotian refugee family who was helped by members of the Pilgrim Church in Duxbury in 1980, came back to town to visit Dr. Skip and Patsy Schippers recently. Their family has flourished, with seven grown children and eight grandchildren.

Photo courtesy Patsy Schippers

Pang Yen and Lao Herr, a Laotian refugee family who was helped by members of the Pilgrim Church in Duxbury in 1980, came back to town to visit Dr. Skip and Patsy Schippers recently. Their family has flourished, with seven grown children and eight grandchildren. Photo courtesy Patsy Schippers At a time when the Syrian refugee crisis dominates headlines and conversations, Pilgrim Church of Duxbury got a visit this past month from a Laotian refugee family it sponsored 36 years ago. The family wanted to thank the people who helped them get to where they are today. Pang Yeng and Lao Her and their baby boy Pao came to the United States in the spring of 1980. The extent of their material belongings were the clothes on their backs and a bucket they used for water. The couple had escaped the communist regime that had taken over following the Laotian Civil War and the Vietnam War. They were Hmong, a persecuted ethnic group. Hmong were known for helping and fighting alongside U.S. soldiers during the Vietnam War. To this day, the Hmong are persecuted in Laos for that reason, and because some are Christian.

“I had seen a lot of coverage of this horrible crisis on the news and I and several others at my church (Pilgrim Church of Duxbury), wanted to do something about it,” said Patsy Schippers, who, with John Stanton, was cochairman of Pilgrim Church’s Laotian Refugee Committee, a group formed out of the church Community Committee. Their spouses, Dr. “Skip” Schippers and Marcy Stanton, as well as members Doris and John Kolstad, Linda Wisner, Sue Cook, Janet Ritch, Liz Cook, Mary Marconi and Norman Martin all worked together to get the couple an apartment and furnishings in Duxbury, food, medical care, jobs, babysitting and education. In a church newsletter from 1980, Refugee Committee co-chair John Stanton wrote: “It was amazing and gratifying to see the numbers of committee members and those of their groups, who contributed significantly to the preparation of the apartment and the start-up needs of the family.”

In the spring of 1980, the Hers arrived at Logan airport and were moved into their new home. Patsy Schippers, whom the family grew to call “Momma Patsy,” remembers church members taking turns driving back and forth for English lessons in Hingham, doctor visits and trips to the grocery store, etc.

"I remember how floored they were by the size and variety in our supermarkets," she said. The Her family soon grew. Two of Pang's younger brothers came over from Laos when the couple was settled, and the church committee helped them enroll at Duxbury High School. Pang and Lao had six more babies after that. There are now seven grown Her children and eight grandchildren.

"The memories I have of this family are all really dear to my heart," said Schippers, remembering that out of necessity, the Schippers and their three children and the young Her family became very close.

"There were things like teaching Pang how to drive a car, teaching the children how to ride bikes, bringing the family to the beach," she said, looking at pictures of baby Pao sitting on Duxbury beach and the family gathered for barbecues. "I really cherished the opportunity to help them get a fresh start." They never forgot the efforts made to give them a second chance at life.

Patsy Schippers got a call from one of the grown Her children earlier this year, after the Hers found their story in Duxbury Clipper archives (May 1, 1980). The children wanted to reach out to thank her and visit Pilgrim Church again. They came to visit in October.

"They were teary-eyed," said Schippers, dabbing at her own eyes. "They told me their father always said, 'If it weren't for Pilgrim Church, we would be dirt farmers in Laos – if we lived.' He did not want to be on welfare and told them that the church took care of all of their needs until they could make their way."

Where are they now? Melrose, Quincy, Cohasset, Boston, Los Angeles, St. Paul, MN, and Dacula, GA. Dacula is where Pang and Lao moved after retirement. But the couple plans to move back to the Boston area now to be close to children and grandchildren, Schippers said. All seven Her children are college graduates with successful careers of their own. One serves in the US Navy.

"This is indeed a success story of a refugee family," said Schippers. "I am proud of my church and the commitment that was made to foster them. I can't say how much it meant to me to see those faces."



Baby Pao Herr sits on the beach in a family photo from the 1980s. "The memories I have of this family are all really dear to my heart," says Patsy Schippers.